



LESS THAN WORDS CAN SAY

by **Richard Mitchell**

FOREWORD



A colleague sent me a questionnaire. It was about my goals in teaching, and it asked me to assign values to a number of beautiful and inspiring goals. I was told that the goals were pretty widely shared by professors all around the country.

Many years earlier I had returned a similar questionnaire, because the man who sent it had promised, in writing, to "analize" my "input." That seemed appropriate, so I put it in. But he didn't do as he had promised, and I had lost all interest in questionnaires.

This one intrigued me, however, because it was lofty. It spoke of a basic appreciation of the liberal arts, a critical evaluation of society, emotional development, creative capacities, students' self-understanding, moral character, interpersonal relations and group participation, and general insight into the knowledge of a discipline.

Unexceptionable goals, every one. Yet it seemed to me, on reflection, that they were none of my damned business. It seemed possible, even likely, that some of those things might flow from the study of language and literature, which is my damned business, but they also might not. Some very well-read people lack moral character and show no creative capacities at all, to say nothing of self-understanding or a basic appreciation of the liberal arts. So, instead of answering the questionnaire, I paid attention to its language; and I began by asking myself how "interpersonal relations" were different from "relations." Surely, I thought, our relations with domestic animals and edible plants were not at issue here; why specify them as "interpersonal"? And how else can we "participate" but in groups? I couldn't answer.

I asked further how a "basic" appreciation was to be distinguished from some other kind of appreciation. I recalled that some of my colleagues were in the business of *teaching* appreciation. It seemed all too possible that they would have specialized their labors, some of them teaching elementary appreciation and others intermediate appreciation, leaving to the most exalted members of the department the senior seminars in advanced appreciation, but even that didn't help with basic appreciation. It made about as much sense as blue appreciation.

As I mulled this over, my eye fell on the same word in the covering letter, which said, "We would appreciate having you respond to these items." Would they, could they,

"basically appreciate" having me respond to these items? Yes, I think they could. And what is the appropriate response to an item? Would it be a basic response?

Suddenly I couldn't understand anything. I noticed, as though for the first time, that the covering letter promised "to complete the goals and objectives aspect of the report." What is a goals aspect? An objectives aspect? How do you complete an aspect? How seriously could I take a mere aspect, when my mind was beguiled by the possibility of a basic aspect? Even of a basic goals and basic objectives basic aspect?

After years of fussing about the pathetic, baffled language of students, I realized that it was not in their labored writings that bad language dwelt. *This*, this inane gabble, this was bad language. Evil language. Here was a man taking the public money for the work of his mind and darkening counsel by words without understanding.

Words never fail. We hear them, we read them; they enter into the mind and become part of us for as long as we shall live. Who speaks reason to his fellow men bestows it upon them. Who mouths inanity disorders thought for all who listen. There must be some minimum allowable dose of inanity beyond which the mind cannot remain reasonable. Irrationality, like buried chemical waste, sooner or later must seep into all the tissues of thought.

This man had offered me inanity. I had almost seized it. If I told you that this little book would provide you with general insight into the knowledge of a discipline, would you read on? If so, then you had *better* read on, for you are in danger. People all around you are offering inanity, and you are ready to seize it, like any well-behaved American consumer dutifully swallowing the best advertised pill. You are, in a certain sense, unconscious.

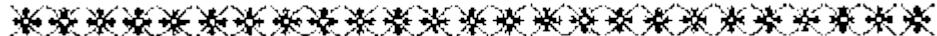
Language is the medium in which we are conscious. The speechless beasts are aware, but they are not conscious. To be conscious is to "know with" something, and a language of some sort is the device with which we know. More precisely, it is the device with which we *can* know. We don't have to. We can, if we please, speak of general insight into the knowledge of a discipline and forgo knowing.

Consciousness has degrees. We can be wide awake or sound asleep. We can be anesthetized. He is not fully conscious who can speak lightly of such things as basic appreciations and general insights into the knowledge of a discipline. He wanders in the twilight sleep of knowing where insubstantial words, hazy and disembodied, have fled utterly from things and ideas. His is an attractive world, dreamy and undemanding, a Lotus-land of dozing addicts. They blow a little smoke our way. It smells good. Suddenly and happily we realize that our creative capacities and self-understanding yearn after basic appreciations and general insights. We nod, we drowse, we fall asleep.

I am trying to stay awake.

Chapter Four

The Voice of Sisera



The invention of discursive prose liberated the mind of man from the limitations of the individual's memory. We can now "know" not just what we can store in our heads, and, as often as not misplace among the memorabilia and used slogans. Nevertheless, that invention made concrete and permanent one of the less attractive facts of language. It called forth a new "mode" of language and provided yet another way in which to distinguish social classes from one another.

Fleeing the lost battle on the plain of [Megiddo](#), [General Sisera](#) is said to have stopped off at the tent of Heber the Kenite. Heber himself was out, but his wife, Jael, was home and happy to offer the sweaty warrior a refreshing drink--"a bottle of milk" in fact, the Bible says. (That seems to find something in translation.) It was a kindly and generous gesture, especially since Sisera asked nothing more than a drink of water.

Having drunk his fill, the tired Sisera stretched out for a little nap and told Jael to keep careful watch, for he had good reason to expect that the Jews who had cut up his army that day were probably looking around for him. Jael said, Sure, sure, don't worry, and when Sisera fell asleep, that crafty lady took a hammer and a tent spike and nailed him through the temples fast to the earth.

I suppose that we are meant to conclude that the Kenites, not themselves Jews, were nevertheless right-thinking folk and that Jael's act had a meaning that was both political and religious. I'm not so sure. I'd like to know, before deciding, just what language it was that Sisera used when he asked for that drink of water.

Scholars think that Sisera was probably the leader of an invading Hittite army, but the details are not important. What is important is that he was obviously a would-be conqueror in a land not his own. He had, until quite recently, been successful; he had come a long way with his iron chariots, powerful weapons that the Jews lacked and that would have won yet another battle if it hadn't been for a spell of bad weather. He was a successful foreign invader from a technologically superior culture. Can you suppose that he felt any obligation or even curious desire to learn the language of the Jews? Wouldn't they have seemed to him just another bunch of local primitives, in no important way to be distinguished from other such bunches he had already overcome? As for the tent-dwelling Kenites, a meager clan of impoverished nomads, who would ever bother to learn their ignorant babble? I'm willing to bet a brand-new Fowler against a D minus freshman theme that Sisera spoke to Jael in his language, not hers, and loudly. With gestures. What

Jael did, a little later, was actually an early example of linguistic consciousness-raising. Hers, not his.

Now, your typical American tourist in Naples doesn't usually get a wooden spike through his head for shouting pidgin English at the natives--a little diarrhea, maybe, but that's about it. Roman legionnaires in Gaul, however, and British soldiers in India did get some of each, once in a while. Conquered peoples hate, along with everything else about them, the language of the conquerors, and with good reason, for the language is itself a weapon. It keeps the vanquished in the dark about meanings and intentions, and it makes it extremely difficult to obey commands that had damn well better be obeyed, and *schnell*, too. Whatever it was that Sisera said to Jael that afternoon, it must have had something like the emotional effect of "*Juden heraus!*" shouted in the streets of a small village in eastern Poland.

History is rich in examples of Siseranism. The language of the Cro-Magnons must have had upon the Neanderthals the same effect as Norman French had upon the English after 1066. Furthermore, it isn't only the victors and the vanquished who dwell together speaking different tongues. The war doesn't really go on forever. When the fighting is over--for a while--the victors and the vanquished often settle down to become the rulers and the ruled. They continue to speak different languages. Their languages may in time merge and become one, but they will still find a way to speak different languages. That is the case with us.

The arrangement offers some advantages on both sides. The powerful can write the laws and the rules in their own language so that the weak come before the courts and the commissions at a double disadvantage. (You'll see what that means when they audit your tax return.) The ruling class also becomes the "better" class, and its language must be the language of literature and philosophy and science and all the gentle arts. The subjects, whose language is deemed insufficiently elegant or complex to express such matters, are thus excluded from the business of the intellect in all its forms and relegated to tradecraft and handiwork, for which their rudimentary babble is just about good enough. On the other hand, the rudimentary babble of the riffraff is, after all, a language that the rulers don't, and generally don't care to, understand. The language of the subjects serves them as a form of "secret" talking, so that servants can mutter, not quite inaudibly, appropriate comments on the lord and his lady. It's the same kind of revenge that schoolboys used to take by learning fluent, rapid pig latin to use in the presence of pompous and pedantic masters.

The linguistic distinction between the rulers and the ruled seems so right, especially to the rulers, that where it doesn't occur naturally it gets invented. Thus the upper classes in Russia in the times of the czars were put to the trouble of learning French, a more "civilized" tongue, and reserved their Russian for speaking to servants, very small children, and domestic animals. Thus the French upper classes from time to time have gone through paroxysms of tortured elegance in language in order to distinguish themselves yet further from their inferiors. It would have seemed reasonable, and handsomely symmetrical, too, for the French aristocrats to have learned Russian, saving

their French for servants, very small children, and domestic animals, but your standard everyday French aristocrat would rather drink out of his fingerbowl than learn a barbarous babble like Russian. It's interesting to notice that in both those cultures certain linguistic distinctions were ultimately obliterated, at least for a while, by bloody revolutions. True, there may have been some other causes as well, but these little lessons of history should cause at least an occasional sleepless night for those of our rulers who like to speak in a language not understood by the people. We don't have two languages, of course, so those who rule us have the same problem that once troubled the French aristocracy. They have to devise an elaborate language-within-a-language that we can understand only sometimes and even then uncertainly. It is a mistake to think that the language of the bureaucrats is merely an ignorant, garbled jargon. They may not always know what they are doing, but what they are doing is not haphazard. It works, too.

We like to make jokes, for instance, about the language of the tax forms. Heh heh, we chuckle, ain't them bureaucrats a caution? Just listen to this here, Madge. Them bureaucrats, however, don't chuckle at all, and if you'd like to see just what the term "stony silence" really means, try chuckling at their jargon when they haul you down to the tax office to ask how you managed to afford that cabin cruiser. Even your own lawyer will start looking around for some lint to pick off his trousers.

And as long as we have a lawyer in view, ain't they something? We read with pitying shakes of the head the disclaimers and demurrs at the bottom of the contract. We like to imagine that we, just plain folks, are somehow, deep down where it really counts, superior to those pointy-headed word-mongers with all their hereinafters. Nevertheless, we do what they tell us to do. We always remember that if we can't figure out from their language what we're required to do, and if we therefore fail to do it, it isn't the writers of the jargon who will be called to account. Our sense of superiority is an illusion, a convenient illusion from somebody's point of view; in fact, when we read the contract, we are afraid. It is the intent of that language to make us afraid. It works. Now that is effective writing.

Imagine that the postman brings you a letter from the Water and Sewer Department or the Bureau of Mines or some such place. Any right-thinking American will eye even the envelope in the same way he would eye some sticky substance dripping from the underparts of his automobile. Things get worse. You open the letter and see at once these words: "You are hereby notified . . ." How do you feel? Are you keen to read on? But you will, won't you? Oh, yes. You will.

Here comes another letter. This one doesn't even have a stamp. It carries instead the hint that something very bad will happen to any mere citizen caught using this envelope for his own subversive purposes. You open it and read: "It has been brought to the attention of this office . . ." Do you throw it out at that point because you find it too preposterous to think that an office can have an attention? Do you immediately write a reply: "Dear So-and-so, I am surprised and distressed by the rudeness of your first ten words, especially since they are addressed to one of those who pay your salary. Perhaps you're having a bad day. Why don't you write again and say something else?" You do not. In fact, you turn

pale and wonder frantically which of your misdeeds has been revealed. Your anxiety is increased by that passive verb--that's what it's for--which suggests that this damaging exposure has been made not by an envious neighbor or a vengeful merchant or an ex-girlfriend or any other perfectly understandable, if detestable, human agent, but by the very nature of the universe. "It has been brought." This is serious.

Among the better class of Grammarians, that construction is known as the Divine Passive. It intends to suggest that neither the writer nor anyone else through whose head you might like to hammer a blunt wooden spike can be held accountable for anything in any way. Like an earthquake or a volcanic eruption, this latest calamity must be accepted as an act of God. God may well be keeping count of the appearances of the Divine Passive.

Another classic intimidation with which to begin a letter is: "According to our records . . ." It reminds you at once, with that plural pronoun, that the enemy outnumbers you, and the reference to "records" makes it clear that they've got the goods. There is even a lofty pretense to fairness, as though you were being invited to bring forth your records to clear up this misunderstanding. You know, however, that they don't suspect for an instant that there's anything wrong in their records. Besides, you don't *have* any records, as they damn well know.

Such frightening phrases share an important attribute. They are not things that ordinary people are likely to say, or even write, to one another except, of course, in certain unpleasant circumstances. We can see their intentions when we put them into more human contexts: "My dear Belinda, You are hereby notified . . ." conveys a message that ought to infuriate even the dullest of Belindas. Why is it then that we are not infuriated when we bear or read such words addressed to us by bureaucrats? We don't even stop to think that those words make up a silly verbal paradox; the only context in which they can possibly appear is the one in which they are not needed at all. No meaning is added to "Your rent is overdue" when the landlord writes, "You are hereby notified that your rent is overdue." What *is* added is the tone of official legality, and the presumption that one of the rulers is addressing one of the ruled. The voice of Sisera puts you in your place, and, strangely enough, you go there.

We Americans make much of our egalitarian society, and we like to think we are not intimidated by wealth and power. Still, we are. There are surely many reasons for that, and about most of them we can do nothing, it seems. But one of the reasons is the very language in which the wealthy and powerful speak to us. When we hear it, something ancient stirs in us, and we take off our caps and hold them to our chests as we listen. About that we *could* do something--all it takes is some education. That must have been in Jefferson's mind when he thought about the importance of universal education in a society of free people. People who are automatically and unconsciously intimidated by the sound of a language that they cannot themselves use easily will never be free. Jefferson must have imagined an America in which all citizens would be able, when they felt like it, to address one another as members of the same class. That we cannot do so is a sore impediment to equality, but, of course, a great advantage to those who *can* use the English of power and wealth.

It would be easier to see bureaucratic language for what it is if only the governors and bureaucrats did in fact speak a foreign tongue. When the Normans ruled England anyone could tell the French was French and English, English. It was the government that might, rarely, pardon you for your crimes, but it needed a friend to forgive you for your sins. Words like "pardon" and "forgive" were clearly in different languages, and, while either might have been translated by the other, they still meant subtly different acts. They still do, even though they are both thought of as English words now. Modern English has swallowed up many such distinctions, but not all. We still know that hearts are broken, not fractured. This is the kind of distinction Winston Churchill had in mind when he advised writers to choose the native English word whenever possible rather than a foreign import. This is good advice, but few can heed it in these days. The standard American education does not provide the knowledge out of which to make such choices.

Chapter Eight

The Pill



Thought control, like birth control, is best undertaken as long as possible before the fact. Many grown-ups will obstinately persist, if only now and then, in composing small strings of sentences in their heads and achieving at least a momentary logic. This probably cannot be prevented, but we have learned how to minimize its consequences by arranging that such grown-ups will be unable to pursue that logic very far. If they were at home in the technology of writing, there's no telling how much social disorder they would cause by thinking things out at length.

Our schools have chosen to cut this danger off as close to the root as possible, thus taking measures to preclude not only the birth of thought but its conception. They give the pill to even the youngest children, but, just to be on the safe side, they give it to everybody else, too, especially all would-be schoolteachers.

Now find a comfortable position and read this miniature museum of contemporary American writing. These little essays were produced by college graduates applying for jobs as schoolteachers. The applicants may not have those jobs yet, but they do have certificates that attest to their competence and assure us that they have satisfied stringent requirements.

A. The use of behavioral objectives in a classroom are good because they help the teacher to see a more clear path for her/his teaching. He/she is able to predetermine what he/she will teach and hopefully at the end of that session the students will have learned what was outlined for them. Behavioral objectives can help the teacher evaluate her/his teaching by looking at them to see what has been accomplished in class. So many times, a teacher can get off of a subject and not realize the students are not learning the material they were designated to learn. If the students are aware of what they are to learn then they can make a greater effort to learn the information. The teacher may use the objectives as a form of evaluation for the students so that she/he may see how far they have progressed and whether or not the topic should be reviewed or more information can be added. Behavioral objectives are an overall good idea to help students and teachers see what direction the learning should be going in and how progress is being made.

B. In the process of teaching science to students there will be preassessment test to determine what the student already knows. From the finding of the preassessment test objectives, teacher and students will be designed. Concepts to be taught will be listed. If the subject area being covered is weather, than the different aspects of weather will be introduced. There will be worksheets and experiment to prove and evaluate the objectives for the activity. The activity children will be given activities that they will have to do on their own example collecting date of the formation of clouds and what weather usually follow certain cloud formation. The project must be flexible so that it meets the need of each child and is meaningful for them.

C. If I had a self-contained classroom with various children on different level, I would try to group them according to their abilities when working on certain subject matters. I would use behavior modification in my classroom in order to motivate the children. If we were working on math for example--If we were playing the bingo game (a game to help them recognize numbers) I would reward one person with a reward for bingoring if they could call out their numbers to me or if they couldn't remember a number I could help them and still they would bingo. I worked with some children in this and it really motivated them to learn because of the reward.

D. start with basic ways of setting & bumping the ball & controlling it--use drills of how many times before missing & others. set & bump ball against the wall-- how to bump & set ball properly. demonstrate

start with different types of serves, find the one that suits them best & stick with it. keep eye on ball--Then start serving over the net. After that start placing the ball (determining where it's going to go. demonstrate so they'll know what I mean

start the spikers for taller individuals to spiking & setters in to setting ball close to net. Use fun games through out to keep them interested. demonstrate spiking

Cover the rules and go into game situation. Teach them how to dig for the ball & how to fall & avoid being injured.

Devide into equal teams & play games of volleyball best 2 out of 3. Use a tournament type play so that all teams will get a chance to play each other & if they're pretty equally matched it will result in some very close & exciting games

Cover any questions the students might have & give them a handout of material that would be covered on a test. handout will include the things not to do & how to do them right.

That's what happens when you've spent four years popping little pills of jargon. Try to put down that nasty suspicion. It's just too much of a coincidence that all four of these teachers could have taken jobs in your local school system. One, maybe. Perhaps, just perhaps, even two. But all four? Impossible! Rest easy.

All of these passages are curious but instructive mixtures of ineptitude and technicality. Writer A, for instance, tells us that the use of behavioral objectives are good, revealing at one stroke a subtle knowledge of pedagogical theory and an inability to match subjects and verbs. The same writer shows an admirable abhorrence of sexism in all those slashed forms, even going so far as to give precedence now to one gender and now the other, but she/he seems confused about prepositions. The importance of this passage, however, is not to be found in such trivia.

Writer A may be confused about the rudiments of English, but he/she-she/he has clearly heard and practiced some jargon. This little essay is built on the assertion that there are such things as behavioral objectives and that they are "an overall good idea." If you've never before heard the term "behavioral objectives," count yourself lucky, but you certainly won't be mystified. Obviously, if we want someone to do something, that must be a "behavioral objective." In schools, adding up a column of figures is thought of as "a behavior," and getting students to do that is a behavioral objective. It's important to notice that adding them up wrong is, of course, also "a behavior," so that to teach children to add correctly becomes a matter of "behavior modification," but more of that later. There are lots of things that A didn't learn in college; some of them we can see, and from them we can infer many others. She/he-he/she *did*, however, learn a kind of vocabulary of special terms, each of which is used to conceal an emptiness of meaning and to make the obvious sound important. To what things or events in the world of experience does the term "behavioral objective" point? They are countless. If we persuade five-year-olds to latch their galoshes or convince a whole nation to convert its schools into gambling casinos, we have accomplished a behavioral objective. Should we fail, we have nevertheless promulgated behavioral objectives. In the language of the school people, an alarm clock would be called a mode of behavioral objective implementation, but so would a Christmas bonus or a thumbscrew. A term that means almost anything means almost nothing. Such a term is a convenient device for those who have almost nothing to say. We have to conclude that A heard about "behavioral objectives" very often in the teacher school--and somewhat less often about clear, precise writing and thinking.

Writer B cannot spell "flexible" or even "then" but has no trouble with "preassessment," a tricky word with lots of s's. He cannot, however, make any sense of the word. Who could? "Preassessment" is something that can only happen before we have done any assessment, and we can preassess something just about as easily as we can pre-eat our breakfasts. The test referred to in B's first sentence might imaginably be called, if you must call it something fancier than just a test, a "pre-teaching" test. In contempt of sense, the "pre-ness" has been transferred to the assessing because it creates such a handsome word. The same principle, by the way, was at work in A, who promised to "predetermine what he/she will teach." You either determine something or you don't. Our language permits us to *say* things like "predetermine," or even "undetermine," and "subdetermine," but it doesn't let us mean anything by them.

Words like "preassessment" are paradoxical. They evoke an imagined world in which there is no sense or logic. To tolerate such words requires dullness of mind; to embrace them, lunacy. Most jargon, however, is something less extreme. We can see its normal attributes in B's use of the word "aspects"; "the different aspects of weather will be introduced."

Can't you just hear teacher B in class? "Dear children, I will now introduce an aspect of weather." What does he *do* then? What *is* an aspect of weather? What idea of the meaning of "weather" must we have if we are to separate it into its "aspects"? Is an aspect of weather a kind of weather--rainy, sunny? Is it a particular event like a hurricane? Is it an attribute of weather? Nice weather for ducks, for instance? Leaving weather aside entirely, what *exactly* is an aspect? Is "aspect," as so many seem to think, just another way of saying "phase" and "factor"? Is phase, perhaps, just one of the factors of an aspect? Can we divide just *anything* up into aspects or only certain kinds of things?

And, by the way, presuming against all odds that B does know what he means by "aspect," just what is involved in "introducing" it? To introduce an aspect, do you name it, or describe it? Do you, perhaps, as the word in fact suggests, stick it in? If "rain" is an aspect of weather, and that's probably what the poor fellow means, how do you go about "introducing" rain? And, for heaven's sake, why?

Writer C introduces--sticks in, that is--something called "behavior modification," an ominous aspect, no doubt, of the consequences of the preassessment of behavioral objectives. Teachers still put up with being called teachers, but they seem reluctant to admit that humble teaching is what they do. They prefer to modify behavior. Take a moment to go back and read again what C has written. Could you rest quietly, in the still watches of the night, knowing that C has been unleashed to modify the behavior of your children?

Aside from the obvious, which is far too comprehensive to have much meaning at all, what could "behavior modification" possibly mean? C says that he/she would "use" it to "motivate" the students. Is there some difference between behavior modification and the *use* of behavior modification, as there is a difference between a hammer and hammering? If so, how is the *use* of behavior modification to be distinguished from the act of

modifying behavior any more than the use of a hammer is to be distinguished from a hammering? Isn't "motivating" itself a kind of behavior modification; and doesn't that sentence say that C will use behavior modification in order to modify behavior?

What it means is that C had come out of teacher school with his/her-her/his head full of empty terms. There is no doubt that C would also spell "preassessment" correctly, although she/he-he/she has a little problem with sentence structure.

There's no point in commenting in any detail on the words of D. It is worth remembering, however, that D is also a college graduate and a certified teacher. What's interesting is his touching faith in the "handout of material," a handout that will include, you will recall, "the things not to do & how to do them right."

Handouts of material are big business in Education. A typical class in Education starts with a handout of material, which handout provides nifty terms like "preassessment test" and "behavior modification." Then the class breaks up into small groups so that the students can rap and reach for themselves the conclusion that behavioral objectives are "an overall good idea." After four years of this, every graduating student walks into the world clutching thick sheaves of handouts of materials made up almost entirely of words and phrases that have little or nothing to do with real things or people or events in the world of experience.

Chapter Twelve **Darkling Plain English**

We have all been charmed and gratified in recent times by what seems to be an official attempt to stamp out jargon and gobbledegook. From a President himself we have heard a call for plain English, and state legislatures here and there are drafting and passing laws requiring simplicity in the wording of contracts and regulations. We are delighted to see that lawyers and moneylenders, also landlords and insurance companies, are opposed to the process. Anything that displeases those odious enemies of clarity and good sense must be desirable, and the cause of plain English is beginning to attract not only politicians who see in it a safe way to please the public but many of those good-hearted citizens who used to be members of SANE.

Here is an example of the sort of thing that infuriates the advocates of plain English. It's an extract from one of those handbooks put out by the [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#), an outfit notorious not only for its torture of English but for the fact that many of its thousands of rules and regulations render each other what they call in Washington "inoperative." It's hard to decide whether the people at OSHA are simply ineffectual bumblerers or supremely talented satirists boring from within. Here, for instance, is how they define an exit: "That portion of a means of egress which is separated from all other spaces of the building or structure by construction or equipment as required in this subpart to provide a protected way of travel to the exit discharge." That's not all. Now they elaborate on "means of egress": "A continuous and unobstructed way of exit travel from any point in a building or structure to a public way [which] consists of three separate and distinct parts: the way of exit access, the exit, and the way of exit discharge."

That's certainly ugly, and it makes us wonder whether an exit has to be defined at all, and, if it does, why couldn't it just be called a way to get out. Then we wonder why a "means of egress" has to be defined at all, and, if it does, why couldn't it be called a way to get to the exit. If these reservations seem reasonable to you, it's because you're just not thinking. You are assuming that any ghastly mess of verbiage that comes from a bureaucracy needs to be simplified because it is needlessly complicated to begin with. Wrong. As it happens, that horrid prose serves its aims perfectly. Regulations of this nature have one clear purpose, and that is to answer, before the fact, any imaginable questions that might be asked in a court of law. For that purpose it's not enough to assume that everyone knows what an exit is. Is a door an exit? Maybe, but maybe not, if a drill press just happens to be standing in front of it. Is a hole in the wall acceptable as an exit? Do you really get out of the building (let's say it's ready to blow up) if you go through a door and find yourself in an enclosed courtyard instead of a "public way"? You don't have to be very clever to think of lots of other such questions, and the writer of this regulation is thinking about your questions. He has done a good job, although he has written something very ugly. But it's *only* ugly; it's not wrong, it's not more complicated than it has to be. It doesn't need simplification; it needs simply to be kept pretty much out of sight, lest it provide some plain English fanatics with what they think is a useful example.

There are, of course, lots of things that ought to be written in such English as the citizens may understand, but there are lots of citizens who ought to learn to read the English in which it is necessary to say some things. This is not a distinction that the plain English faddist is always able to make. For many of them, though, it doesn't really matter.

The marvelous thing about the plain English fad, for a politician, is that there's no way it can hurt him. If he fights for automobile safety or for gun control, he's bound to lose some votes and some campaign contributions. On the other hand, if he comes out against automobile safety and against gun control, he's bound to lose some votes and some campaign contributions. Politicians have to balance things like this all the time, always hoping to make a little more on the peanuts than they have to lose on the popcorn. It's not easy, and they're delighted, actually, whenever they can find a cause with a high yield of profit and very little overhead. Plain English is just such a cause.

True, there are a few opponents of the simplification of legal and public language, but just look at them--a pack of notorious scoundrels. You can always show a profit when you castigate lawyers, moneylenders, and landlords. Not only are these enemies of good sense unpopular, but their case against plain English is difficult to present and difficult to understand, and, coming from them, sounds suspiciously self-serving. The case for plain English, on the other hand, is so easy to state and seems so reasonable that it now ranks with those splendid self-evident truths so dear to all Americans.

How can we tell whether or not something is written in plain English? It's simple. We have a couple of systems available that call for counting words and syllables in the average sentence and dividing something by something or maybe multiplying something by something after we have divided something by something. And there you have it--a rational, concrete index in the form of a number, a plain English score. A "good" score means, naturally, that lots of Americans can understand it, and a "bad" score means that few Americans can understand it. Theoretically it ought to be possible to write in such a way that *no* Americans can understand your English, or so that *all* Americans can understand your English. In fact, the former is common, but when we find it we rarely discover that its difficulty has anything to do with sentence length or numbers of words and syllables. The latter, however, is impossible, since there are so many Americans who can read nothing at all. Those various indexing systems are not meant to deal with the extremes. They want only to say, of this or that piece of prose, that it probably calls for an eighth-grade ability to read, or a college graduate's ability to read, or something like that. Let's hope that the scale is adjusted year by year, since this year's eighth graders, like this year's college graduates, don't read quite as well as last year's, although they do read a bit better than next year's. Unless the indexers give this some thought, we'll be faced with a continual downward revision of all those laws and contracts and regulations, because this year's newly revised and simplified driver's license application form that almost any high school graduate can read will be, in 1994, incomprehensible to those who hold master's degrees in sociology or doctorates in education.

The problem has some entertaining qualities. We have found ways to produce every year more and more high school graduates who can barely read. More and more of the citizens are finding, accordingly, that more and more documents are hard to read. The automatic populists, now common among us, see an obvious solution to this problem. If the people are having trouble understanding what is written, then we must write it more simply. It's analogous to the view that if the people haven't got the brains to buckle their seat belts or to refrain from sticking their hands into the blades of their lawn mowers, then we must redesign the seat belts and the lawn mowers. We reveal thus that our national commitment to education is pious hypocrisy. If we really believed that the people could be taught, we would teach them the worth of buckling their seat belts and keeping their hands out of the lawn mower blades. We would even teach them to read, not just enough to puzzle out some slightly complicated prose, but to read, when necessary, the inevitably complicated expression of complicated ideas. It's as though you went to the hospital with a broken arm and the people in the emergency room, instead of setting the thing, got busy on the telephone trying to find you some other line of work, something that requires only one arm.

Like all cockeyed social notions, the plain English movement invites us to look around and see who's going to make a profit from it. A paranoid observer might think to detect a massive conspiracy. And here's how it goes: First we start providing the schools with lots of taxpayers' money to support research into quaint and curious innovations in teaching children how to read. This results in some extraordinary gimmick, and a very profitable one, not only for some professionals of education who are paid to cook it up but especially for that massive educational-industrial complex that makes and sells at high prices books and flash cards and sets of gadgets to go with every new fad. These people, of course, would like to see as many new fads as possible, because each one makes all the old stuff obsolete. What the gimmick is, is not important; for a while, and in some schools still, it was the weird notion that reading would be better taught without reference to the sounds of letters but rather through identifying whole words as symbols of something. The latest gimmick seems to be speed reading, which will make it possible, at a stiff price, to read a complete gothic romance in three minutes and forty seconds, thus ensuring a steady market for gothic romances. A well-trained keypunch operator could go through sixteen of them on her lunch hour, provided of course that she ate something like a sandwich or a slice of pizza. Speed reading does require the use of at least one hand.

Let the gimmick be whatever it is. Think of your own, if you need an example, something like printing vowels in different colors or providing new and tricky shapes for certain letters. These, of course, have been done, so you'll have to stretch a bit; and, when you do come up with something that seems unspeakably zany, keep your mouth shut. If you mention it in public, it won't be long before someone offers to fund it. It's best to avoid offering the occasion for sin. But enough. Let's say we have a gimmick.

Now we experiment, being careful to use methods and controls that would make a first-year chemistry student blush and stating the problems and the expected results (those we call "outcomes") in the silliest possible jargon. Don't worry, we'll "prove" the efficacy of our gimmick (remember the new math?). As a result, or outcome, although we'd rather not use that word in the singular, more and more students in the public schools will read less and less.

Do not make the mistake of thinking that this means that our gimmick has failed. Pay attention. This means that the gimmick has succeeded. Remember, we have taken the role of dentists handing out lollipops to ensure that there will be no falling off of customers. Now that things are worse than ever, we view with alarm the "reading problem" in the schools. It's time for a new round of grants, projects, experimental proposals, expensive consultants, packets of materials, instruction booklets, sets of visual aids, more teachers, carpeted classrooms, air conditioning, just about anything you can imagine. It's all good for the education business, and if it seems to have been exaggerated, just you go footing around yourself and find anybody anywhere who proposes that we can teach reading (or anything else) better by spending less money.

If there were a conspiracy that worked all these wonders, you can imagine the joy of the conspirators in the windfall that the plain English agitation has brought them. In one way it's a happy result of that conspiracy, and perhaps, therefore, not unexpected. Naturally,

as fewer and fewer literate people move out of the schools and start signing leases and borrowing money for Corvettes and stereo systems, it more and more appears that the documents put before them are just too hard. They're always too hard for somebody; it's just that now we have more and more of those somebodies, and the problem grows more visible. It becomes a cause; it suddenly seems that we can make a case for rudimentary English as one of an American's inalienable rights. You deprive him of that--it's practically like forbidding the sale of classic comics or those benoveled versions of movies. It's a splendid cause for politicians and educationists, especially, because anyone who opposes it must do so either out of some devious special interest by which he lives or out of a positively un-American elitism intended to maintain a rigid class structure and deprive the ignorant of access to professorships in philosophy and literature. Both politicians and educationists will profit from the cause, the politicians at once, in good will and support from the public, and the educationists somewhat later, in more grants, and because they will sooner or later be the very ones called on to do the necessary simplifying.

The bureaucrats who have produced most of our dismal official English will, at first, be instructed to fix it. They will try, but *nihil ex nihilo*. That English is the mess it is because they did it in the first place and they'll never be able to fix it. They write that kind of stuff because that is the kind of stuff that they write. Ultimately, in desperation, they will call on those people who say they know about these things--the professionals of reading and writing. There will be lucrative jobs and consultancies available in every branch and department of government for remedial-reading teachers. The foxes will be made the guardians of the hen house.

Here is an example of what the bureaucrats will do when left to their own devices. The following passage is from a document called "Draft Regulations to Implement the [National Environmental Policy Act](#)." It *has* been rewritten into what they call plain English, and a covering letter from the chairman of the President's Council on Environmental Quality says that it "represents an extraordinary improvement over the existing guidelines":

The agency need make the finding of no significant impact available for public review for thirty days before the agency makes its final determination whether to prepare an environmental impact statement and before the action may begin only in one of the following limited circumstances: . . .

Remember, this has been simplified; the original is hard to imagine. There are no difficult words in this passage--even the five syllables of "determination" do not make it a difficult word, whatever they might do to the passage's score. What these people *mean* by "determination" might be better served by "judgment" or even "decision," but still, most readers will not be baffled by "determination." In fact, there's nothing at all--neither word nor thought--nothing at all difficult for any moderately educated reader in that passage. Why then is it so hard to understand? Why do you have to read it over a couple of times, should you really care to know what it means? Does this passage, already simplified from God knows what, need further simplification? No. All it needs is a little attention to the

stuff that used to be taught to sixth-grade students back in the days when sixth-grade students actually wrote compositions.

People who have learned even a little about how English works have all heard about modifiers. They know that a modifier is something that tells us something about something, and that there are many kinds of modifiers, some with tricky names. The way we teach things like this, as though they were subject to arbitrary rules like the rules of basketball, is so stupid and tedious that most people block out modifiers as soon as possible. The English system of modification, however, does not exist in a set of paltry rules that do what they can, and fail, to describe some very elaborate operations not simply of the language but of the mind. To say that an adjective modifies a noun is worth nothing unless we see that sticking adjectives on nouns is the outward equivalent of some mysterious inward process that goes on in the mind. It's not entirely absurd to think that somewhere in the past of mankind someone, for the first time, did in his mind the equivalent of putting an adjective to a noun, and saw, not only a relationship, but *this* special relationship between two things of different kinds. That moment was more important to our history than the flight of the Wright brothers. In sum, all the seemingly complicated kinds of modification in English are just ways of thinking and seeing how things go with each other or reflect each other. Modifiers in our language are not *aids* to understanding relationships; they are *the ways* to understand relationships. A mistake in this matter either comes from or causes a clouded mind. Usually it's both.

This passage clouds our minds not because what it means to say is difficult, not because the matter is too technical for most of us, but for a very simple reason. In effect, it says that the agency need do something only under certain circumstances. That's a clear thought. They need do A only when B. The nature of the relationship between A and B is tucked into the words "need... only." In the passage, thirty-four words intervene between "need" and "only," so that by the time we see "only" we have forgotten to expect any further modification of "need." It's like finding one more step when you thought you had reached the landing. Between those two words, furthermore, we may have been a bit bewildered by something that sounds like a modification but isn't: "impact available for public review." It takes a moment to look back and see that "available for public review" is actually supposed to go with "finding." When we add to those two failures--failures of the writing to match the modification systems of the mind--the tedious parade of words and clauses not yet related to any idea that we can identify, the passage becomes what it is, awkward, puzzling, and exasperating. It requires of us more attention and backtracking than its ideas are worth.

This passage does not need simplification or even a change in its choice of words. It needs merely to have been written by someone with elementary skills in finding the right thing to do on the page to call forth certain things in the mind. The idea is not complicated; the prose, in fact, is not complicated--it's just bad. Nevertheless, it *could* be simplified even using that vocabulary. Here's how it might go:

In some cases, a finding of no significant impact does have to be made available for public review. Public review means that you have to give the public thirty

days to look it over before you can even decide whether to write an environmental impact statement, and certainly before any action is taken. Here are the cases in which you do have to provide the public review:

There. All we need now is to draw little pictures.

The people who write like this write like this simply because they are the people who write like this. Even when you can convince them that there is something wrong with what they have written, you cannot make them into people who wouldn't write like this. If you send them to go and fix it, you'll get what you deserve--it's like hoping the termites will build you a new house out of the glop they have made of your old one.

So the bureaucrats will need help, and lo, help is at hand. The educational establishment that has provided the problem will come forward to be paid for the solution. Thus firefighters sometimes set fires so that they can try out the new pumper. Hosts of advisers and consultants will be added to bureaucracies of all kinds. New courses of study will appear in the schools to prepare people for such lucrative and respectable labors. New courses of study will appear in the teacher-training academies to prepare the teachers for the teaching of new courses of study that will prepare the advisers and consultants. New journals of the new study will blossom; new workshops and conferences will convene from Tacoma to Key West; new federal grants will support studies that will find new findings. If you had any sense at all, you'd buy some stock right now.

There is, of course, an alternative to the plain English fad, but it's almost too dangerous to discuss in public. We could simply decide to educate all Americans to such a degree that they could read and understand even the OSHA definition of an exit. We could even educate them well enough so that they could understand why OSHA has to say things like that and why it doesn't matter much. We could have the schools devote lots of time, especially in the early grades, to spelling and vocabulary and even writing so that the next generation will grow up able to grasp relative clauses and complex sentences at sight and understand at once the meaning of "reciprocal" and "indemnify" and even "mitigate." This sounds so easy and so right that there must be a catch, and indeed there is. When we consider the inevitable consequences of such a policy, we can see that it is probably too dangerous to contemplate.

Just think what happens in the mind of the person who knows the difference between restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses. Anyone who understands that distinction is on the brink of seeing the difference between simple fact and elaborative detail and may well begin to make judgments about the logic of such relationships. He may start bothering his head about the difference between things essential and things accidental, a disorder that often leads to the discovery of tautologies. Furthermore, anyone who sees the difference between restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses is likely to understand *why* modifiers should be close to the things they modify and thus begin to develop a sense of the way in which ideas grow from one another. From that, it's not a long way to detecting non sequiturs and unstated premises and even false analogies.

Unfortunately, we just don't know how to teach skillful reading and writing without developing many undesirable and socially destructive side effects. Should we raise up a generation of literate Americans, very little of the America that we know would survive. We depend on a steady background level of ignorance and stupidity. A skillful reader, for instance, cannot be depended upon to buy this after-shave rather than some other because he is always weighing and considering statements that just weren't meant to be weighed and considered. He may capriciously and irresponsibly switch not only from one after-shave to another but even from one hot comb to another. Our industries depend on what we call "brand loyalty," and thoughtful readers will all be brand traitors. They may, even probably will, go the next step and become brand nihilists who decide not to buy any aftershave or hot comb at all. It may even occur to them that the arguments for the ownership of trash compactors and toaster ovens are specious, and then they won't buy any trash compactors or toaster ovens. Economic chaos will follow.

The next thing you know they'll start listening very carefully to the words and sentences of the politicians, and they'll decide that there isn't one of them worth voting for anywhere on the ballot. There's no knowing where this will end. The day will come when a President is elected only because those few feeble-minded citizens who still vote just happened to bump up against his lever more often than they bumped up against the other guy's lever. A President, of course, doesn't care how he gets elected, but he might lose clout among world leaders when they remind him that he owes his high office to the random twitchings of thirty-seven imbeciles. That will be the end of network election coverage as we know it.